THE DAFFODIL FIELDS

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Cover

THE DAFFODIL FIELDS

BY

JOHN MASEFIELD

AUTHOR OF "THE EVERLASTING MERCY," "THE WIDOW IN
THE BYE STREET," "THE STORY OF A
ROUND-HOUSE," ETC.

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THE DAFFODIL FIELDS

I

Between the barren pasture and the wood
There is a patch of poultry-stricken grass,
Where, in old time, Ryemeadows' Farmhouse stood,
And human fate brought tragic things to pass.

A spring comes bubbling up there, cold as glass,
It bubbles down, crusting the leaves with lime,
Babbling the self-same song that it has sung through time.

Ducks gobble at the selvage of the brook,
But still it slips away, the cold hill-spring,
Past the Ryemeadows' lonely woodland nook
Where many a stubble gray-goose preens her wing,
On, by the woodland side. You hear it sing
Past the lone copse where poachers set their wires,
Past the green hill once grim with sacrificial fires.

Another water joins it; then it turns,
Runs through the Ponton Wood, still turning west,
Past foxgloves, Canterbury bells, and ferns,
And many a blackbird's, many a thrush's nest;
The cattle tread it there; then, with a zest
It sparkles out, babbling its pretty chatter
Through Foxholes Farm, where it gives white-faced cattle water.

Under the road it runs, and now it slips
Past the great ploughland, babbling, drop and linn,
To the moss'd stumps of elm trees which it lips,
And blackberry-bramble-trails where eddies spin.
Then, on its left, some short-grassed fields begin,
Red-clayed and pleasant, which the young spring fills
With the never-quiet joy of dancing daffodils.

There are three fields where daffodils are found;
The grass is dotted blue-gray with their leaves;
Their nodding beauty shakes along the ground
Up to a fir-clump shutting out the eaves
Of an old farm where always the wind grieves
High in the fir boughs, moaning; people call
This farm The Roughs, but some call it the Poor Maid's Hall.

There, when the first green shoots of tender corn
Show on the plough; when the first drift of white
Stars the black branches of the spiky thorn,
And afternoons are warm and evenings light,

The shivering daffodils do take delight,
Shaking beside the brook, and grass comes green,
And blue dog-violets come and glistening celandine.

And there the pickers come, picking for town
Those dancing daffodils; all day they pick;
Hard-featured women, weather-beaten brown,
Or swarthy-red, the colour of old brick.
At noon they break their meats under the rick.
The smoke of all three farms lifts blue in air
As though man's passionate mind had never suffered there.

And sometimes as they rest an old man comes,
Shepherd or carter, to the hedgerow-side,
And looks upon their gangrel tribe, and hums,
And thinks all gone to wreck since master died;
And sighs over a passionate harvest-tide
Which Death's red sickle reaped under those hills,
There, in the quiet fields among the daffodils.

When this most tragic fate had time and place,
And human hearts and minds to show it by,
Ryemeadows' Farmhouse was in evil case:
Its master, Nicholas Gray, was like to die.
He lay in bed, watching the windy sky,
Where all the rooks were homing on slow wings,
Cawing, or blackly circling in enormous rings.

With a sick brain he watched them; then he took
Paper and pen, and wrote in straggling hand
(Like spider's legs, so much his fingers shook)
Word to the friends who held the adjoining land,
Bidding them come; no more he could command
His fingers twitching to the feebling blood;
He watched his last day's sun dip down behind the wood,

While all his life's thoughts surged about his brain:
Memories and pictures clear, and faces known--
Long dead, perhaps; he was a child again,
Treading a threshold in the dark alone.

Then back the present surged, making him moan.
He asked if Keir had come yet. "No," they said.
"Nor Occleve?" "No." He moaned: "Come soon or I'll be dead."

The names like live things wandered in his mind:
"Charles Occleve of The Roughs," and "Rowland Keir--
Keir of the Foxholes"; but his brain was blind,
A blind old alley in the storm of the year,
Baffling the traveller life with "No way here,"
For all his lantern raised; life would not tread
Within that brain again, along those pathways red.

Soon all was dimmed but in the heaven one star.
"I'll hold to that," he said; then footsteps stirred.
Down in the court a voice said, "Here they are,"
And one, "He's almost gone." The sick man heard.
"Oh God, be quick," he moaned. "Only one word.
Keir! Occleve! Let them come. Why don't they come?
Why stop to tell them that?--the devil strike you dumb.

"I'm neither doll nor dead; come in, come in.
Curse you, you women, quick," the sick man flamed.
"I shall be dead before I can begin.
A sick man's womaned-mad, and nursed and damed."
Death had him by the throat; his wrath was tamed.
"Come in," he fumed; "stop muttering at the door."
The friends came in; a creaking ran across the floor.

"Now, Nick, how goes it, man?" said Occleve. "Oh,"
The dying man replied, "I am dying; past;
Mercy of God, I die, I'm going to go.
But I have much to tell you if I last.
Come near me, Occleve, Keir. I am sinking fast,
And all my kin are coming; there, look there.
All the old, long dead Grays are moving in the air.

"It is my Michael that I called you for:
My son, abroad, at school still, over sea.
See if that hag is listening at the door.
No? Shut the door; don't lock it, let it be.

No faith is kept to dying men like me.
I am dipped deep and dying, bankrupt, done;
I leave not even a farthing to my lovely son.

"Neighbours, these many years our children played,
Down in the fields together, down the brook;
Your Mary, Keir, the girl, the bonny maid,
And Occleve's Lion, always at his book;
Them and my Michael: dear, what joy they took
Picking the daffodils; such friends they've been--
My boy and Occleve's boy and Mary Keir for queen.

"I had made plans; but I am done with, I.
Give me the wine. I have to ask you this:
I can leave Michael nothing, and I die.
By all our friendship used to be and is,
Help him, old friends. Don't let my Michael miss
The schooling I've begun. Give him his chance.
He does not know I am ill; I kept him there in France.

"Saving expense; each penny counts. Oh, friends,
Help him another year; help him to take
His full diploma when the training ends,
So that my ruin won't be his. Oh, make
This sacrifice for our old friendship's sake,
And God will pay you; for I see God's hand
Pass in most marvellous ways on souls: I understand

"How just rewards are given for man's deeds
And judgment strikes the soul. The wine there, wine.
Life is the daily thing man never heeds.
It is ablaze with sign and countersign.
Michael will not forget: that son of mine
Is a rare son, my friends; he will go far.
I shall behold his course from where the blessed are."

"Why, Nick," said Occleve, "come, man. Gather hold.
Rouse up. You've given way. If times are bad,
Times must be bettering, master; so be bold;
Lift up your spirit, Nicholas, and be glad.

Michael's as much to me as my dear lad.
I'll see he takes his school." "And I," said Keir.
"Set you no keep by that, but be at rest, my dear.

"We'll see your Michael started on the road."
"But there," said Occleve, "Nick's not going to die.
Out of the ruts, good nag, now; zook the load.
Pull up, man. Death! Death and the fiend defy.
We'll bring the farm round for you, Keir and I.
Put heart at rest and get your health." "Ah, no,"
The sick man faintly answered, "I have got to go."

Still troubled in his mind, the sick man tossed.
"Old friends," he said, "I once had hoped to see
Mary and Michael wed, but fates are crossed,
And Michael starts with nothing left by me.
Still, if he loves her, will you let it be?
So in the grave, maybe, when I am gone,
I'll know my hope fulfilled, and see the plan go on."

"I judge by hearts, not money," answered Keir.
"If Michael suits in that and suits my maid,
I promise you, let Occleve witness here
He shall be free for me to drive his trade.
Free, ay, and welcome, too. Be not afraid,
I'll stand by Michael as I hope some friend
Will stand beside my girl in case my own life end."

"And I," said Occleve; but the sick man seemed
Still ill at ease. "My friends," he said, "my friends,
Michael may come to all that I have dreamed,
But he's a wild yarn full of broken ends.
So far his life in France has made amends.
God grant he steady so; but girls and drink
Once brought him near to hell, aye, to the very brink.

"There is a running vein of wildness in him:
Wildness and looseness both, which vices make
That woman's task a hard one who would win him:
His life depends upon the course you take.

He is a fiery-mettled colt to break,
And one to curb, one to be curbed, remember."
The dying voice died down, the fire left the ember.

But once again it flamed. "Ah me," he cried;
"Our secret sins take body in our sons,
To haunt our age with what we put aside.
I was a devil for the women once.
He is as I was. Beauty like the sun's;
Within, all water; minded like the moon.
Go now. I sinned. I die. I shall be punished soon."

The two friends tiptoed to the room below.
There, till the woman came to them, they told
Of brave adventures in the long ago,
Ere Nick and they had thought of growing old;
Snipe-shooting in the marshlands in the cold,
Old soldiering days as yeomen, days at fairs,
Days that had sent Nick tired to those self-same chairs.

They vowed to pay the schooling for his son.
They talked of Michael, testing men's report,
How the young student was a lively one,
Handsome and passionate both, and fond of sport,
Eager for fun, quick-witted in retort.
The girls' hearts quick to see him cocking by,
Young April on a blood horse, with a roving eye.

And, as they talked about the lad, Keir asked
If Occleve's son had not, at one time, been
Heartsick for Mary, though with passion masked.
"Ay," Occleve said: "Time was. At seventeen.
It took him hard, it ran his ribs all lean,
All of a summer; but it passed, it died.
Her fancying Michael better touched my Lion's pride."

Mice flickered from the wainscot to the press,
Nibbling at crumbs, rattling to shelter, squeaking.
Each ticking in the clock's womb made life less;
Oil slowly dropped from where the lamp was leaking.

At times the old nurse set the staircase creaking,
Harked to the sleeper's breath, made sure, returned,
Answered the questioning eyes, then wept. The great stars burned.

"Listen," said Occleve, "listen, Rowland. Hark."
"It's Mary, come with Lion," answered Keir:
"They said they'd come together after dark."
He went to door and called "Come in, my dear."
The burning wood log blazed with sudden cheer,
So that a glowing lighted all the room.
His daughter Mary entered from the outer gloom.

The wind had brought the blood into her cheek,
Heightening her beauty, but her great grey eyes
Were troubled with a fear she could not speak.
Firm, scarlet lips she had, not made for lies.
Gentle she seemed, pure-natured, thoughtful, wise,
And when she asked what turn the sickness took,
Her voice's passing pureness on a low note shook.

Young Lion Occleve entered at her side,
A well-built, clever man, unduly grave,
One whose repute already travelled wide
For skill in breeding beasts. His features gave
Promise of brilliant mind, far-seeing, brave,
One who would travel far. His manly grace
Grew wistful when his eyes were turned on Mary's face.

"Tell me," said Mary, "what did doctor say?
How ill is he? What chance of life has he?
The cowman said he couldn't last the day,
And only yesterday he joked with me."
"We must be meek," the nurse said; "such things be."
"There's little hope," said Keir; "he's dying, sinking."
"Dying without his son," the young girl's heart was thinking.

"Does Michael know?" she asked. "Has he been called?"
A slow confusion reddened on the faces,
As when one light neglect leaves friends appalled.
"No time to think," said nurse, "in such like cases."

Old Occleve stooped and fumbled with his laces.
"Let be," he said; "there's always time for sorrow.
He could not come in time; he shall be called to-morrow."

"There is a chance," she cried, "there always is.
Poor Mr. Gray might rally, might live on.
Oh, I must telegraph to tell him this.
Would it were day still and the message gone."
She rose, her breath came fast, her grey eyes shone.
She said, "Come, Lion; see me through the wood.
Michael must know." Keir sighed. "Girl, it will do no good.

"Our friend is on the brink and almost passed."
"All the more need," she said, "for word to go;
Michael could well arrive before the last.
He'd see his father's face at least. I know
The office may be closed; but even so,
Father, I must. Come, Lion." Out they went,
Into the roaring woodland where the saplings bent.

Like breakers of the sea the leafless branches
Swished, bowing down, rolling like water, roaring
Like the sea's welcome when the clipper launches
And full affronted tideways call to warring.
Daffodils glimmered underfoot, the flooring
Of the earthy woodland smelt like torn-up moss;
Stones in the path showed white, and rabbits ran across.

They climbed the rise and struck into the ride,
Talking of death, while Lion, sick at heart,
Thought of the woman walking at his side,
And as he talked his spirit stood apart,
Old passion for her made his being smart,
Rankling within. Her thought for Michael ran
Like glory and like poison through his inner man.

"This will break Michael's heart," he said at length.
"Poor Michael," she replied; "they wasted hours.
He loved his father so. God give him strength.
This is a cruel thing this life of ours."

The windy woodland glimmered with shut flowers,
White wood anemones that the wind blew down.
The valley opened wide beyond the starry town.

"Ten," clanged out of the belfry. Lion stayed
One hand upon a many-carven bole.
"Mary," he said. "Dear, my beloved maid,
I love you, dear one, from my very soul."
Her beauty in the dusk destroyed control.
"Mary, my dear, I've loved you all these years."
"Oh, Lion, no," she murmured, choking back her tears.

"I love you," he repeated. "Five years since
This thing began between us: every day
Oh sweet, the thought of you has made me wince;
The thought of you, my sweet, the look, the way.
It's only you, whether I work or pray,
You and the hope of you, sweet you, dear you.
I never spoke before; now it has broken through.

"Oh, my beloved, can you care for me?"
She shook her head. "Oh, hush, oh, Lion dear,
Don't speak of love, for it can never be
Between us two, never, however near.
Come on, my friend, we must not linger here."
White to the lips she spoke; he saw her face
White in the darkness by him in the windy place.

"Mary, in time you could, perhaps," he pleaded.
"No," she replied, "no, Lion; never, no."
Over the stars the boughs burst and receded.
The nobleness of Love comes in Love's woe.
"God bless you then, beloved, let us go.
Come on," he said, "and if I gave you pain,
Forget it, dear; be sure I never will again."

They stepped together down the ride, their feet
Slipped on loose stones. Little was said; his fate,
Staked on a kingly cast, had met defeat.
Nothing remained but to endure and wait.

She was still wonderful, and life still great.
Great in that bitter instant side by side,
Hallowed by thoughts of death there in the blinded ride.

He heard her breathing by him, saw her face
Dim, looking straight ahead; her feet by his
Kept time beside him, giving life a grace;
Night made the moment full of mysteries.
"You are beautiful," he thought; "and life is this:
Walking a windy night while men are dying,
To cry for one to come, and none to heed our crying."

"Mary," he said, "are you in love with him,
With Michael? Tell me. We are friends, we three."
They paused to face each other in the dim.
"Tell me," he urged. "Yes, Lion," answered she;
"I love him, but he does not care for me.
I trust your generous mind, dear; now you know,
You, who have been my brother, how our fortunes go.

"Now come; the message waits." The heavens cleared,
Cleared, and were starry as they trod the ride.
Chequered by tossing boughs the moon appeared;
A whistling reached them from the Hall House side;
Climbing, the whistler came. A brown owl cried.
The whistler paused to answer, sending far
That haunting, hunting note. The echoes laughed Aha!

Something about the calling made them start.
Again the owl note laughed; the ringing cry
Made the blood quicken within Mary's heart.
Like a dead leaf a brown owl floated by.
"Michael?" said Lion. "Hush." An owl's reply
Came down the wind; they waited; then the man,
Content, resumed his walk, a merry song began.

"Michael," they cried together. "Michael, you?"
"Who calls?" the singer answered. "Where away?
Is that you, Mary?" Then with glad halloo
The singer ran to meet them on the way.

It was their Michael; in the moonlight grey,
They made warm welcome; under tossing boughs,
They met and told the fate darkening Ryemeadows' House.

As they returned at speed their comrade spoke
Strangely and lightly of his coming home,
Saying that leaving France had been a joke,
But that events now proved him wise to come.
Down the steep 'scarpment to the house they clomb,
And Michael faltered in his pace; they heard
How dumb rebellion in the much-wronged cattle stirred.

And as they came, high, from the sick man's room,
Old Gray burst out a-singing of the light
Streaming upon him from the outer gloom,
As his eyes dying gave him mental sight.
"Triumphing swords," he carolled, "in the bright;
Oh fire, Oh beauty fire," and fell back dead.
Occleve took Michael up to kneel beside the bed.

So the night passed; the noisy wind went down;
The half-burnt moon her starry trackway rode.
Then the first fire was lighted in the town,
And the first carter stacked his early load.
Upon the farm's drawn blinds the morning glowed;
And down the valley, with little clucks and trills,
The dancing waters danced by dancing daffodils.

II

They buried Gray; his gear was sold; his farm
Passed to another tenant. Thus men go;
The dropped sword passes to another arm,
And different waters in the river flow.
His two old faithful friends let Michael know
His father's ruin and their promise. Keir
Brought him to stay at Foxholes till a path was clear.

There, when the sale was over, all three met
To talk about the future, and to find
Upon what project Michael's heart was set.
Gentle the two old men were, thoughtful, kind.
They urged the youth to speak his inmost mind,
For they would compass what he chose; they told
How he might end his training; they would find the gold.

"Thanks, but I cannot," Michael said. He smiled.
"Cannot. They've kicked me out. I've been expelled;
Kicked out for good and all for being wild.
They stopped our evening leave, and I rebelled.
I am a gentle soul until compelled,
And then I put my ears back. The old fool
Said that my longer presence might inflame the school.

"And I am glad, for I have had my fill
Of farming by the book with those old fools,
Exhausted talkatives whose blood is still,
Who strive to bind a living man with rules.
This fettered kind of life, these laws, these schools,
These codes, these checks, what are they but the clogs
Made by collected sheep to mortify the dogs?

"And I have had enough of them; and now
I make an end of them. I want to go
Somewhere where man has never used a plough,
Nor ever read a book; where clean winds blow,
And passionate blood is not its owner's foe,
And land is for the asking for it. There
Man can create a life and have the open air.

"The River Plate's the country. There, I know,
A man like me can thrive. There, on the range,
The cattle pass like tides; they ebb and flow,
And life is changeless in unending change,
And one can ride all day, and all day strange,
Strange, never trodden, fenceless, waiting there,
To feed unending cattle for the men who dare.

"There I should have a chance; this land's too old."
Old Occleve grunted at the young man's mood;
Keir, who was losing money, thought him bold,
And thought the scheme for emigration good.
He said that, if he wished to go, he should.
South to the pampas, there to learn the trade.
Old Occleve thought it mad, but no objection made.

So it was settled that the lad should start,
A place was found for him, a berth was taken;
And Michael's beauty plucked at Mary's heart,
And now the fabric of their lives was shaken:
For now the hour's nearness made love waken
In Michael's heart for Mary. Now Time's guile
Granted her passionate prayer, nor let her see his smile.

Granted his greatest gifts; a night time came
When the two walking down the water learned
That life till then had only been a name;
Love had unsealed their spirits: they discerned.
Mutely, at moth time there, their spirits yearned.
"I shall be gone three years, dear soul," he said.
"Dear, will you wait for me?" "I will," replied the maid.

So troth was pledged between them. Keir received
Michael as Mary's suitor, feeling sure
That the lad's fortunes would be soon retrieved,
Having a woman's promise as a lure.
The three years' wait would teach them to endure.
He bade them love and prosper and be glad.
And fast the day drew near that was to take the lad.

Cowslips had come along the bubbling brook,
Cowslips and oxlips rare, and in the wood
The many-blossomed stalks of bluebells shook;
The outward beauty fed their mental mood.
Thought of the parting stabbed her as he wooed,
Walking the brook with her, and day by day,
The precious fortnight's grace dropped, wasted, slipped away.

Till only one clear day remained to her:
One whole clear, precious day, before he sailed.
Some forty hours, no more, to minister
To months of bleakness before which she quailed.
Mist rose along the brook; the corncrake railed;
Dim red the sunset burned. He bade her come
Into the wood with him; they went, the night came dumb.

Still as high June, the very water's noise
Seemed but a breathing of the earth; the flowers
Stood in the dim like souls without a voice.
The wood's conspiracy of occult powers
Drew all about them, and for hours on hours
No murmur shook the oaks, the stars did house
Their lights like lamps upon those never-moving boughs.

Under their feet the woodland sloped away
Down to the valley, where the farmhouse lights
Were sparks in the expanse the moon made grey.
June's very breast was bare this night of nights.
Moths blundered up against them, greys and whites
Moved on the darkness where the moths were out,
Nosing for sticky sweet with trembling uncurled snout.

But all this beauty was but music played,
While the high pageant of their hearts prepared.
A spirit thrilled between them, man to maid,
Mind flowed in mind, the inner heart was bared,
They needed not to tell how much each cared;
All the soul's strength was at the other's soul.
Flesh was away awhile, a glory made them whole.

Nothing was said by them; they understood,
They searched each other's eyes without a sound,
Alone with moonlight in the heart of the wood,
Knowing the stars and all the soul of the ground.
"Mary," he murmured. "Come." His arms went round,
A white moth glimmered by, the woods were hushed;
The rose at Mary's bosom dropped its petals, crushed.

No word profaned the peace of that glad giving,
But the warm dimness of the night stood still,
Drawing all beauty to the point of living,
There in the beech-tree's shadow on the hill.
Spirit to spirit murmured; mingling will
Made them one being; Time's decaying thought
Fell from them like a rag; it was the soul they sought.

The moonlight found an opening in the boughs;
It entered in, it filled that sacred place
With consecration on the throbbing brows;
It came with benediction and with grace.
A whispering came from face to yearning face:
"Beloved, will you wait for me?" "My own."
"I shall be gone three years, you will be left alone;

"You'll trust and wait for me?" "Yes, yes," she sighed;
She would wait any term of years, all time--
So faithful to first love these souls abide,
Carrying a man's soul with them as they climb.
Life was all flower to them; the church bells' chime
Rang out the burning hour ere they had sealed
Love's charter there below the June sky's starry field.

Sweetly the church bells' music reached the wood,
Chiming an old slow tune of some old hymn,
Calling them back to life from where they stood
Under the moonlit beech-tree grey and dim.
"Mary," he murmured; pressing close to him,
Her kiss came on the gift he gave her there,
A silken scarf that bore her name worked in his hair.

But still the two affixed their hands and seals
To a life compact witnessed by the sky,
Where the great planets drove their glittering wheels,
Bringing conflicting fate, making men die.
They loved, and she would wait, and he would try.
"Oh, beauty of my love," "My lovely man."
So beauty made them noble for their little span.

Time cannot pause, however dear the wooer;
The moon declined, the sunrise came, the hours,
Left to the lovers, dwindled swiftly fewer,
Even as the seeds from dandelion-flowers
Blow, one by one, until the bare stalk cowers,
And the June grass grows over; even so
Daffodil-picker Time took from their lives the glow,

Stole their last walk along the three green fields,
Their latest hour together; he took, he stole
The white contentment that a true love yields;
He took the triumph out of Mary's soul.
Now she must lie awake and blow the coal
Of sorrow of heart. The parting hour came;
They kissed their last good-bye, murmuring the other's name.

Then the flag waved, the engine snorted, then
Slowly the couplings tautened, and the train
Moved, bearing off from her her man of men;
She looked towards its going blind with pain.
Her father turned and drove her home again.
It was a different home. Awhile she tried
To cook the dinner there, but flung her down and cried.

Then in the dusk she wandered down the brook,
Treading again the trackway trod of old,
When she could hold her loved one in a look.
The night was all unlike those nights of gold.
Michael was gone, and all the April old,
Withered and hidden. Life was full of ills;
She flung her down and cried i' the withered daffodils

III

The steaming river loitered like old blood
On which the tugboat bearing Michael beat,
Past whitened horse bones sticking in the mud.
The reed stems looked like metal in the heat.

Then the banks fell away, and there were neat,
Red herds of sullen cattle drifting slow.
A fish leaped, making rings, making the dead blood flow.

Wormed hard-wood piles were driv'n in the river bank,
The steamer threshed alongside with sick screws
Churning the mud below her till it stank;
Big gassy butcher-bubbles burst on the ooze.
There Michael went ashore; as glad to lose
One not a native there, the Gauchos flung
His broken gear ashore, one waved, a bell was rung.

The bowfast was cast off, the screw revolved,
Making a bloodier bubbling; rattling rope
Fell to the hatch, the engine's tune resolved
Into its steadier beat of rise and slope;
The steamer went her way; and Michael's hope
Died as she lessened; he was there alone.
The lowing of the cattle made a gradual moan.

He thought of Mary, but the thought was dim;
That was another life, lived long before.
His mind was in new worlds which altered him.
The startling present left no room for more.
The sullen river lipped, the sky, the shore
Were vaster than of old, and lonely, lonely.
Sky and low hills of grass and moaning cattle only.

But for a hut bestrewn with skulls of beeves,
Round which the flies danced, where an Indian girl
Bleared at him from her eyes' ophthalmic eaves,
Grinning a welcome; with a throaty skirl,
She offered him herself; but he, the churl,
Stared till she thought him fool; she turned, she sat,
Scratched in her short, black hair, chewed a cigar-end, spat.

Up, on the rise, the cattle bunched; the bulls
Drew to the front with menace, pawing bold,
Snatching the grass-roots out with sudden pulls,
The distant cattle raised their heads; the wold

Grew dusty at the top; a waggon rolled,
Drawn by a bickering team of mules whose eyes
Were yellow like their teeth and bared and full of vice.

Down to the jetty came the jingling team,
An Irish cowboy driving, while a Greek
Beside him urged the mules with blow and scream.
They cheered the Indian girl and stopped to speak.
Then lifting her aloft they kissed her cheek,
Calling to Michael to be quick aboard,
Or they (they said) would fall from virtue, by the Lord.

So Michael climbed aboard, and all day long
He drove the cattle range, rise after rise,
Dotted with limber shorthorns grazing strong,
Cropping sweet-tasted pasture, switching flies;
Dull trouble brooded in their smoky eyes.
Some horsemen watched them. As the sun went down,
The waggon reached the estancia builded like a town.

With wide corrales where the horses squealed,
Biting and lashing out; some half-wild hounds
Gnawed at the cowbones littered on the field,
Or made the stallions stretch their picket bounds.
Some hides were drying; horsemen came from rounds,
Unsaddled stiff, and turned their mounts to feed,
And then brewed bitter drink and sucked it through a reed.

The Irishman removed his pipe and spoke:
"You take a fool's advice," he said. "Return.
Go back where you belong before you're broke;
You'll spoil more clothes at this job than you'll earn;
It's living death, and when you die you'll burn:
Body and soul it takes you. Quit it. No?
Don't say I never told you, then. Amigos. Ho.

"Here comes a Gringo; make him pay his shot.
Pay up your footing, Michael; rum's the word,
It suits my genius, and I need a lot."
So the great cauldron full was mixed and stirred.

And all night long the startled cattle heard
Shouting and shooting, and the moon beheld
Mobs of dim, struggling men, who fired guns and yelled

That they were Abel Brown just come to town,
Michael among them. By a bonfire some
Betted on red and black for money down,
Snatching their clinking winnings, eager, dumb.
Some danced unclad, rubbing their heads with rum.
The grey dawn, bringing beauty to the skies,
Saw Michael stretched among them, far too drunk to rise.

His footing paid, he joined the living-shed,
Lined with rude bunks and set with trestles: there
He, like the other ranchers, slept and fed,
Save when the staff encamped in open air,
Rounding the herd for branding. Rude and bare
That barrack was; men littered it about
With saddles, blankets blue, old headstalls, many a clout

Torn off to wipe a knife or clean a gun,
Tin dishes, sailors' hookpots, all the mess
Made where the outdoor work is never done
And every cleaning makes the sleeping less.
Men came from work too tired to undress,
And slept all standing like the trooper's horse;
Then with the sun they rose to ride the burning course,

Whacking the shipment cattle into pen,
Where, in the dust, among the stink of burning,
The half-mad heifers bolted from the men,
And tossing horns arose and hoofs were churning,
A lover there had little time for yearning;
But all day long, cursing the flies and heat,
Michael was handling steers on horseback till his feet

Gave on dismounting. All day long he rode,
Then, when the darkness came, his mates and he
Entered dog-tired to the rude abode
And ate their meat and sucked their bitter tea,

And rolled themselves in rugs and slept. The sea
Could not make men more drowsy; like the dead,
They lay under the lamp while the mosquitoes fed.

There was no time to think of Mary, none;
For when the work relaxed, the time for thought
Was broken up by men demanding fun:
Cards, or a well-kept ring while someone fought,
Or songs and dancing; or a case was bought
Of white Brazilian rum, and songs and cheers
And shots and oaths rang loud upon the twitching ears

Of the hobbled horses hopping to their feed.
So violent images displaced the rose
In Michael's spirit; soon he took the lead;
None was more apt than he for games or blows.
Even as the battle-seeking bantam crows,
So crowed the cockerel of his mind to feel
Life's bonds removed and blood quick in him toe to heel.

But sometimes when her letters came to him,
Full of wise tenderness and maiden mind,
He felt that he had let his clearness dim;
The riot with the cowboys seemed unkind
To that far faithful heart; he could not find
Peace in the thought of her; he found no spur
To instant upright action in his love for her.

She faded to the memory of a kiss,
There in the rough life among foreign faces;
Love cannot live where leisure never is;
He could not write to her from savage places,
Where drunken mates were betting on the aces,
And rum went round and smutty songs were lifted.
He would not raise her banner against that; he drifted,

Ceasing, in time, to write, ceasing to think,
But happy in the wild life to the bone;
The riding in vast space, the songs, the drink,
Some careless heart beside him like his own,

The racing and the fights, the ease unknown
In older, soberer lands; his young blood thrilled.
The pampas seemed his own, his cup of joy was filled.

And one day, riding far after strayed horses,
He rode beyond the ranges to a land
Broken and made most green by watercourses,
Which served as strayline to the neighbouring brand.
A house stood near the brook; he stayed his hand,
Seeing a woman there, whose great eyes burned,
So that he could not choose but follow when she turned.

After that day he often rode to see
That woman at the peach farm near the brook,
And passionate love between them came to be
Ere many days. Their fill of love they took;
And even as the blank leaves of a book
The days went over Mary, day by day,
Blank as the last, was turned, endured, passed, turned away.

Spring came again greening the hawthorn buds;
The shaking flowers, new-blossomed, seemed the same,
And April put her riot in young bloods;
The jays flapped in the larch clump like blue flame.
She did not care; his letter never came.
Silent she went, nursing the grief that kills,
And Lion watched her pass among the daffodils.

IV

Time passed, but still no letter came; she ceased,
Almost, to hope, but never to expect.
The June moon came which had beheld love's feast,
Then waned, like it; the meadow-grass was flecked
With moon-daisies, which died; little she recked
Of change in outward things, she did not change;
Her heart still knew one star, one hope, it did not range,

Like to the watery hearts of tidal men,
Swayed by all moons of beauty; she was firm,
When most convinced of misery firmest then.
She held a light not subject to the worm.
The pageant of the summer ran its term,
The last stack came to staddle from the wain;
The snow fell, the snow thawed, the year began again.

With the wet glistening gold of celandines,
And snowdrops pushing from the withered grass,
Before the bud upon the hawthorn greens,
Or blackbirds go to building; but, alas!
No spring within her bosom came to pass.
"You're going like a ghost," her father said;
"Now put him out of mind, and be my prudent maid."

It was an April morning brisk with wind,
She wandered out along the brook sick-hearted,
Picking the daffodils where the water dinned,
While overhead the first-come swallow darted.
There, at the place where all the passion started,
Where love first knocked about her maiden heart,
Young Lion Occleve hailed her, calling her apart

To see his tulips at The Roughs, and take
A spray of flowering currant; so she went.
It is a bitter moment, when hearts ache,
To see the loved unhappy; his intent
Was but to try to comfort her; he meant
To show her that he knew her heart's despair,
And that his own heart bled to see her wretched there.

So, as they talked, he asked her, had she heard
From Michael lately? No, she had not; she
Had been a great while now, without a word.
"No news is always good news," answered he.
"You know," he said, "how much you mean to me;
You've always been the queen. Oh, if I could
Do anything to help, my dear, you know I would."

"Nothing," she said, much touched. "But you believe--
You still believe in him?" "Why, yes," he said.
Lie though it was he did not dare deceive
The all too cruel faith within the maid.
"That ranching is a wild and lonely trade,
Far from all posts; it may be hard to send;
All puzzling things like this prove simple in the end.

"We should have heard if he were ill or dead.
Keep a good heart. Now come"; he led the way
Beyond the barton to the calving-shed,
Where, on a strawy litter topped with hay,
A double-pedigree prize bull-calf lay.
"Near three weeks old," he said, "the Wrekin's pet;
Come up, now, son, come up; you haven't seen him yet.

"We have done well," he added, "with the stock,
But this one, if he lives, will make a name."
The bull-calf gambolled with his tail acock,
Then shyly nosed towards them, scared but tame;
His troublous eyes were sulky with blue flame.
Softly he tip-toed, shying at a touch;
He nosed, his breath came sweet, his pale tongue curled to clutch.

They rubbed his head, and Mary went her way,
Counting the dreary time, the dreary beat
Of dreary minutes dragging through the day;
Time crawled across her life with leaden feet;
There still remained a year before her sweet
Would come to claim her; surely he would come;
Meanwhile there was the year, her weakening father, home.

Home with its deadly round, with all its setting,
Things, rooms, and fields and flowers to sting, to burn
With memories of the love time past forgetting
Ere absence made her very being yearn.
"My love, be quick," she moaned, "return, return;
Come when the three years end, oh, my dear soul,
It's bitter, wanting you." The lonely nights took toll,

Putting a sadness where the beauty was,
Taking a lustre from the hair; the days
Saw each a sadder image in the glass.
And when December came, fouling the ways,
And ashless beech-logs made a Christmas blaze,
Some talk of Michael came; a rumour ran,
Someone had called him "wild" to some returning mail,

Who, travelling through that cattle-range, had heard
Nothing more sure than this; but this he told
At second-hand upon a cowboy's word.
It struck on Mary's heart and turned her cold.
That winter was an age which made her old.
"But soon," she thought, "soon the third year will end;
March, April, May, and June, then I shall see my friend.

"He promised he would come; he will not fail.
Oh, Michael, my beloved man, come soon;
Stay not to make a home for me, but sail.
Love and the hour will put the world in tune.
You in my life for always is the boon
I ask from life--we two, together, lovers."
So leaden time went by who eats things and discovers.

Then, in the winds of March, her father rode,
Hunting the Welland country on Black Ned;
The tenor cry gave tongue past Clencher's Lode,
And on he galloped, giving the nag his head;
Then, at the brook, he fell, was picked up dead.
Hounds were whipped off; men muttered with one breath,
"We knew that hard-mouthed brute would some day be his death."

They bore his body on a hurdle home;
Then came the burial, then the sadder day
When the peaked lawyer entered like a gnome,
With word to quit and lists of debts to pay.
There was a sale; the Foxholes passed away
To strangers, who discussed the points of cows,
Where love had put such glory on the lovers' brows.

Kind Lion Occleve helped the maid's affairs.
Her sorrow brought him much beside her; he
Caused her to settle, having stilled her cares,
In the long cottage under Spital Gree.
He had no hope that she would love him; she
Still waited for her lover, but her eyes
Thanked Lion to the soul; he made the look suffice.

By this the yearling bull-calf had so grown
That all men talked of him; mighty he grew,
Huge-shouldered, scaled above a hundred stone,
With deep chest many-wrinkled with great thew,
Plain-loined and playful-eyed; the Occleves knew
That he surpassed his pasture; breeders came
From far to see this bull; he brought the Occleves fame.

Till a meat-breeding rancher on the plains
Where Michael wasted, sent to buy the beast,
Meaning to cross his cows with heavier strains
Until his yield of meat and bone increased.
He paid a mighty price; the yearling ceased
To be the wonder of the countryside.
He sailed in Lion's charge, south, to the Plate's red tide.

There Lion landed with the bull, and there
The great beast raised his head and bellowed loud,
Challenging that expanse and that new air;
Trembling, but full of wrath and thunder-browed,
Far from the daffodil fields and friends, but proud,
His wild eye kindled at the great expanse.
Two scraps of Shropshire life they stood there; their advance

Was slow along the well-grassed cattle land,
But at the last an end was made; the brute
Ate his last bread crust from his master's hand,
And snuffed the foreign herd and stamped his foot;
Steers on the swelling ranges gave salute.
The great bull bellowed back and Lion turned;
His task was now to find where Michael lived; he learned

The farm's direction, and with heavy mind,
Thinking of Mary and her sorrow, rode,
Leaving the offspring of his fields behind.
A last time in his ears the great bull lowed.
Then, shaking up his horse, the young man glowed
To see the unfenced pampas opening out
Grass that makes old earth sing and all the valleys shout.

At sunset on the second day he came
To that white cabin in the peach-tree plot
Where Michael lived; they met, the Shropshire name
Rang trebly dear in that outlandish spot.
Old memories swam up dear, old joys forgot,
Old friends were real again; but Mary's woe
Came into Lion's mind, and Michael vexed him so,

Talking with careless freshness, side by side
With that dark Spanish beauty who had won,
As though no heart-broke woman, heavy-eyed,
Mourned for him over sea, as though the sun
Shone but to light his steps to love and fun,
While she, that golden and beloved soul,
Worth ten of him, lay wasting like an unlit coal.

So supper passed; the meat in Lion's gorge
Stuck at the last, he could not bide that face.
The idle laughter on it plied the forge
Where hate was smithying tools; the jokes, the place,
Wrought him to wrath; he could not stay for grace.
The tin mug full of red wine spilled and fell.
He kicked his stool aside with "Michael, this is hell.

"Come out into the night and talk to me."
The young man lit a cigarette and followed;
The stars seemed trembling at a brink to see;
A little ghostly white-owl stooped and holloed.
Beside the stake-fence Lion stopped and swallowed,
While all the wrath within him made him grey.
Michael stood still and smoked, and flicked his ash away.

"Well, Lion," Michael said, "men make mistakes,
And then regret them; and an early flame
Is frequently the worst mistake man makes.
I did not seek this passion, but it came.
Love happens so in life. Well? Who's to blame?
You'll say I've broken Mary's heart; the heart
Is not the whole of life, but an inferior part,

"Useful for some few years and then a curse.
Nerves should be stronger. You have come to say
The three-year term is up; so much the worse.
I cannot meet the bill; I cannot pay.
I would not if I could. Men change. To-day
I know that that first choice, however sweet,
Was wrong and a mistake; it would have meant defeat,

"Ruin and misery to us both. Let be.
You say I should have told her this? Perhaps.
You try to make a loving woman see
That the warm link which holds you to her snaps.
Neglect is deadlier than the thunder-claps.
Yet she is bright and I am water. Well,
I did not make myself; this life is often hell.

"Judge if you must, but understand it first.
We are old friends, and townsmen, Shropshire born,
Under the Wrekin. You believe the worst.
You have no knowledge how the heart is torn,
Trying for duty up against the thorn.
Now say I've broken Mary's heart: begin.
Break hers, or hers and mine, which were the greater sin?"

"Michael," said Lion, "I have heard you. Now
Listen to me. Three years ago you made
With a most noble soul a certain vow.
Now you reject it, saying that you played.
She did not think so, Michael, she has stayed,
Eating her heart out for a line, a word,
News that you were not dead; news that she never heard.

"Not once, after the first. She has held firm
To what you counted pastime; she has wept
Life, day by weary day throughout the term,
While her heart sickened, and the clock-hand crept.
While you, you with your woman here, have kept
Holiday, feasting; you are fat; you smile.
You have had love and laughter all the ghastly while.

"I shall be back in England six weeks hence,
Standing with your poor Mary face to face;
Far from a pleasant moment, but intense.
I shall be asked to tell her of this place.
And she will eye me hard and hope for grace,
Some little crumb of comfort while I tell;
And every word will burn like a red spark from hell,

"That you have done with her, that you are living
Here with another woman; that you care
Nought for the pain you've given and are giving;
That all your lover's vows were empty air.
This I must tell: thus I shall burn her bare,
Burn out all hope, all comfort, every crumb,
End it, and watch her whiten, hopeless, tearless, dumb.

"Or do I judge you wrongly?" He was still.
The cigarette-end glowed and dimmed with ash;
A preying night bird whimpered on the hill.
Michael said "Ah!" and fingered with his sash,
Then stilled. The night was still; there came no flash
Of sudden passion bursting. All was still;
A lonely water gurgled like a whip-poor-will.

"Now I must go," said Lion; "where's the horse?"
"There," said his friend; "I'll set you on your way."
They caught and rode, both silent, while remorse
Worked in each heart, though neither would betray
What he was feeling, and the moon came grey,
Then burned into an opal white and great,
Silvering the downs of grass where these two travelled late,

Thinking of English fields which that moon saw,
Fields full of quiet beauty lying hushed
At midnight in the moment full of awe,
When the red fox comes creeping, dewy-brushed.
But neither spoke; they rode; the horses rushed,
Scattering the great clods skywards with such thrills
As colts in April feel there in the daffodils.

V

The river brimming full was silvered over
By moonlight at the ford; the river bank
Smelt of bruised clote buds and of yellow clover.
Nosing the gleaming dark the horses drank,
Drooping and dripping as the reins fell lank;
The men drooped too; the stars in heaven drooped;
Rank after hurrying rank the silver water trooped

In ceaseless bright procession past the shallows,
Talking its quick inconsequence. The friends,
Warmed by the gallop on the unfenced fallows,
Felt it a kindlier thing to make amends.
"A jolly burst," said Michael; "here it ends.
Your way lies straight beyond the water. There.
Watch for the lights, and keep those two stars as they bear."

Something august was quick in all that sky,
Wheeling in multitudinous march with fire;
The falling of the wind brought it more nigh,
They felt the earth take solace and respire;
The horses shifted foothold in the mire,
Splashing and making eddies. Lion spoke:
"Do you remember riding past the haunted oak

"That Christmas Eve, when all the bells were ringing,
So that we picked out seven churches' bells,
Ringing the night, and people carol-singing?
It hummed and died away and rose in swells

Like a sea breaking. We have been through hells
Since then, we two, and now this being here
Brings all that Christmas back, and makes it strangely near."

"Yes," Michael answered, "they were happy times,
Riding beyond there; but a man needs change;
I know what they connote, those Christmas chimes,
Fudge in the heart, and pudding in the grange.
It stifles me all that; I need the range,
Like this before us, open to the sky;
There every wing is clipped, but here a man can fly."

"Ah," said his friend, "man only flies in youth,
A few short years at most, until he finds
That even quiet is a form of truth,
And all the rest a coloured rag that blinds.
Life offers nothing but contented minds.
Some day you'll know it, Michael. I am grieved
That Mary's heart will pay until I am believed."

There was a silence while the water dripped
From the raised muzzles champing on the steel.
Flogging the crannied banks the water lipped.
Night up above them turned her starry wheel;
And each man feared to let the other feel
How much he felt; they fenced; they put up bars.
The moon made heaven pale among the withering stars.

"Michael," said Lion, "why should we two part?
Ride on with me; or shall we both return,
Make preparation, and to-morrow start,
And travel home together? You would learn
How much the people long to see you; turn.
We will ride back and say good-bye, and then
Sail, and see home again, and see the Shropshire men,

"And see the old Shropshire mountain and the fair,
Full of drunk Welshmen bringing mountain ewes;
And partridge shooting would be starting there."
Michael hung down his head and seemed to choose.

xxxiv

The horses churned fresh footing in the ooze.
Then Michael asked if Tom were still alive,
Old Tom, who fought the Welshman under Upton Drive,

For nineteen rounds, on grass, with the bare hands?
"Shaky," said Lion, "living still, but weak;
Almost past speaking, but he understands."
"And old Shon Shones we teased so with the leek?"
"Dead." "When?" "December." Michael did not speak,
But muttered "Old Jones dead." A minute passed.
"What came to little Sue, his girl?" he said at last.

"Got into trouble with a man and died;
Her sister keeps the child." His hearer stirred.
"Dead, too? She was a pretty girl," he sighed,
"A graceful pretty creature, like a bird.
What is the child?" "A boy. Her sister heard
Too late to help; poor Susan died; the man
None knew who he could be, but many rumours ran."

"Ah," Michael said. The horses tossed their heads;
A little wind arising struck in chill;
"Time," he began, "that we were in our beds."
A distant heifer challenged from the hill,
Scraped at the earth with 's forefoot and was still.
"Come with me," Lion pleaded. Michael grinned;
He turned his splashing horse, and prophesied a wind.

"So long," he said, and "Kind of you to call.
Straight on, and watch the stars"; his horse's feet
Trampled the firmer foothold, ending all.
He flung behind no message to his sweet,
No other word to Lion; the dull beat
Of his horse's trample drummed upon the trail;
Lion could watch him drooping in the moonlight pale,

Drooping and lessening; half expectant still
That he would turn and greet him; but no sound
Came, save the lonely water's whip-poor-will
And the going horse hoofs dying on the ground.

"Michael," he cried, "Michael!" A lonely mound
Beyond the water gave him back the cry.
"That's at an end," he said, "and I have failed her--I."

Soon the far hoof-beats died, save for a stir
Half heard, then lost, then still, then heard again.
A quickening rhythm showed he plied the spur.
Then a vast breathing silence took the plain.
The moon was like a soul within the brain
Of the great sleeping world; silent she rode
The water talked, talked, talked; it trembled as it flowed.

A moment Lion thought to ride in chase.
He turned, then turned again, knowing his friend.
He forded through with death upon his face,
And rode the plain that seemed never to end.
Clumps of pale cattle nosed the thing unkenned,
Riding the night; out of the night they rose,
Snuffing with outstretched heads, stamping with surly lows,

Till he was threading through a crowd, a sea
Of curious shorthorns backing as he came,
Barring his path, but shifting warily;
He slapped the hairy flanks of the more tame.
Unreal the ghostly cattle lumbered lame.
His horse kept at an even pace; the cows
Broke right and left like waves before advancing bows.

Lonely the pampas seemed amid that herd.
The thought of Mary's sorrow pricked him sore;
He brought no comfort for her, not a word;
He would not ease her pain, but bring her more.
The long miles dropped behind; lights rose before,
Lights and the seaport and the briny air;
And so he sailed for home to comfort Mary there.

* * * * *

When Mary knew the worst she only sighed,
Looked hard at Lion's face, and sat quite still,

xxxvi

White to the lips, but stern and stony-eyed,
Beaten by life in all things but the will.
Though the blow struck her hard it did not kill.
She rallied on herself, a new life bloomed
Out of the ashy heart where Michael lay entombed.

And more than this: for Lion touched a sense
That he, the honest humdrum man, was more
Than he by whom the glory and the offence
Came to her life three bitter years before.
This was a treason in her being's core;
It smouldered there; meanwhile as two good friends
They met at autumn dusks and winter daylight-ends.

And once, after long twilight talk, he broke
His strong restraint upon his passion for her,
And burningly, most like a man he spoke,
Until her pity almost overbore her.
It could not be, she said; her pity tore her;
But still it could not be, though this was pain.
Then on a frosty night they met and spoke again.

And then he wooed again, clutching her hands,
Calling the maid his mind, his heart, his soul,
Saying that God had linked their lives in bands
When the worm Life first started from the goal;
That they were linked together, past control,
Linked from all time, could she but pity; she
Pitied him from the soul, but said it could not be.

"Mary," he asked, "you cannot love me? No?"
"No," she replied; "would God I could, my dear."
"God bless you, then," he answered, "I must go,
Go over sea to get away from here,
I cannot think of work when you are near;
My whole life falls to pieces; it must end.
This meeting now must be 'good-bye,' beloved friend."

White-lipped she listened, then with failing breath,
She asked for yet a little time; her face

Was even as that of one condemned to death.
She asked for yet another three months' grace,
Asked it, as Lion inly knew, in case
Michael should still return; and "Yes" said he,
"I'll wait three months for you, beloved; let it be."

Slowly the three months dragged: no Michael came.
March brought the daffodils and set them shaking.
April was quick in Nature like green flame;
May came with dog-rose buds, and corncrakes craking,
Then dwindled like her blossom; June was breaking.
"Mary," said Lion, "can you answer now?"
White like a ghost she stood, he long remembered how.

Wild-eyed and white, and trembling like a leaf,
She gave her answer, "Yes"; she gave her lips,
Cold as a corpse's to the kiss of grief,
Shuddering at him as if his touch were whips.
Then her best nature, struggling to eclipse
This shrinking self, made speech; she jested there;
They searched each other's eyes, and both souls saw despair.

So the first passed, and after that began
A happier time: she could not choose but praise
That recognition of her in the man
Striving to salve her pride in myriad ways;
He was a gentle lover: gentle days
Passed like a music after tragic scenes;
Her heart gave thanks for that; but still the might-have-beens

Haunted her inner spirit day and night,
And often in his kiss the memory came
Of Michael's face above her, passionate, white,
His lips at her lips murmuring her name,
Then she would suffer sleepless, sick with shame,
And struggle with her weakness. She had vowed
To give herself to Lion; she was true and proud.

He should not have a woman sick with ghosts,
But one firm-minded to be his; so time

Passed one by one the summer's marking posts,
The dog-rose and the foxglove and the lime.
Then on a day the church-bells rang a chime.
Men fired the bells till all the valley filled
With bell-noise from the belfry where the jackdaws build.

Lion and she were married; home they went,
Home to The Roughs as man and wife; the news
Was printed in the paper. Mary sent
A copy out to Michael. Now we lose
Sight of her for a time, and the great dews
Fall, and the harvest-moon grows red and fills
Over the barren fields where March brings daffodils.

VI

The rider lingered at the fence a moment,
Tossed out the pack to Michael, whistling low,
Then rode, waving his hand, without more comment,
Down the vast grey-green pampas sloping slow.
Michael's last news had come so long ago,
He wondered who had written now; the hand
Thrilled him with vague alarm, it brought him to a stand.

He opened it with one eye on the hut,
Lest she within were watching him, but she
Was combing out her hair, the door was shut,
The green sun-shutters closed, she could not see.
Out fell the love-tryst handkerchief which he
Had had embroidered with his name for her;
It had been dearly kept, it smelt of lavender.

Something remained: a paper, crossed with blue,
Where he should read; he stood there in the sun,
Reading of Mary's wedding till he knew
What he had cast away, what he had done.
He was rejected, Lion was the one.
Lion, the godly and the upright, he.

The black lines in the paper showed how it could be.

He pocketed the love gift and took horse,
And rode out to the pay-shed for his savings.
Then turned, and rode a lonely water-course,
Alone with bitter thoughts and bitter cravings.
Sun-shadows on the reeds made twinkling wavings;
An orange-bellied turtle scooped the mud;
Mary had married Lion, and the news drew blood.

And with the bitterness, the outcast felt
A passion for those old kind Shropshire places,
The ruined chancel where the nuns had knelt;
High Ercall and the Chase End and the Chases,
The glimmering mere, the burr, the well-known faces,
By Wrekin and by Zine and country town.
The orange-bellied turtle burrowed further down.

He could remember Mary now; her crying
Night after night alone through weary years,
Had touched him now and set the cords replying;
He knew her misery now, her ache, her tears,
The lonely nights, the ceaseless hope, the fears,
The arm stretched out for one not there, the slow
Loss of the lover's faith, the letting comfort go.

"Now I will ride," he said. Beyond the ford
He caught a fresh horse and rode on. The night
Found him a guest at Pepe Blanco's board,
Moody and drinking rum and ripe for fight;
Drawing his gun, he shot away the light,
And parried Pepe's knife and caught his horse,
And all night long he rode bedevilled by remorse.

At dawn he caught an eastward-going ferry,
And all day long he steamed between great banks
Which smelt of yellow thorn and loganberry.
Then wharves appeared, and chimneys rose in ranks,
Mast upon mast arose; the river's flanks
Were filled with English ships, and one he found

Needing another stoker, being homeward bound.

And all the time the trouble in his head
Ran like a whirlwind moving him; he knew
Since she was lost that he was better dead.
He had no project outlined, what to do,
Beyond go home; he joined the steamer's crew.
She sailed that night: he dulled his maddened soul,
Plying the iron coal-slice on the bunker coal.

Work did not clear the turmoil in his mind;
Passion takes colour from the nature's core;
His misery was as his nature, blind.
Life was still turmoil when he went ashore.
To see his old love married lay before;
To see another have her, drink the gall,
Kicked like a dog without, while he within had all.

* * * * *

Soon he was at the Foxholes, at the place
Whither, from over sea, his heart had turned
Often at evening-ends in times of grace.
But little outward change his eye discerned;
A red rose at her bedroom window burned,
Just as before. Even as of old the wasps
Poised at the yellow plums: the gate creaked on its hasps,

And the white fantails sidled on the roof
Just as before; their pink feet, even as of old,
Printed the frosty morning's rime with proof.
Still the zew-tallat's thatch was green with mould;
The apples on the withered boughs were gold.
Men and the times were changed: "And I," said he,
"Will go and not return, since she is not for me.

"I'll go, for it would be a scurvy thing
To spoil her marriage, and besides, she cares
For that half-priest she married with the ring.
Small joy for me in seeing how she wears,

Or seeing what he takes and what she shares.
That beauty and those ways: she had such ways,
There in the daffodils in those old April days."

So with an impulse of good will he turned,
Leaving that place of daffodils; the road
Was paven sharp with memories which burned;
He trod them strongly under as he strode.
At the Green Turning's forge the furnace glowed;
Red dithying sparks flew from the crumpled soft
Fold from the fire's heart; down clanged the hammers oft.

That was a bitter place to pass, for there
Mary and he had often, often stayed
To watch the horseshoe growing in the glare.
It was a tryst in childhood when they strayed.
There was a stile beside the forge; he laid
His elbows on it, leaning, looking down
The river-valley stretched with great trees turning brown.

Infinite, too, because it reached the sky,
And distant spires arose and distant smoke;
The whiteness on the blue went stilly by;
Only the clinking forge the stillness broke.
Ryemeadows brook was there; The Roughs, the oak
Where the White Woman walked; the black firs showed
Around the Occleve homestead Mary's new abode.

A long, long time he gazed at that fair place,
So well remembered from of old; he sighed.
"I will go down and look upon her face,
See her again, whatever may betide.
Hell is my future; I shall soon have died,
But I will take to hell one memory more;
She shall not see nor know; I shall be gone before;

"Before they turn the dogs upon me, even.
I do not mean to speak; but only see.
Even the devil gets a peep at heaven;
One peep at her shall come to hell with me;

One peep at her, no matter what may be."
He crossed the stile and hurried down the slope.
Remembered trees and hedges gave a zest to hope.

* * * * *

A low brick wall with privet shrubs beyond
Ringed in The Roughs upon the side he neared.
Eastward some bramble bushes cloaked the pond;
Westward was barley-stubble not yet cleared.
He thrust aside the privet boughs and peered.
The drooping fir trees let their darkness trail
Black like a pirate's masts bound under easy sail.

The garden with its autumn flowers was there;
Few that his wayward memory linked with her.
Summer had burnt the summer flowers bare,
But honey-hunting bees still made a stir.
Sprigs were still bluish on the lavender,
And bluish daisies budded, bright flies poised;
The wren upon the tree-stump carolled cheery-voiced.

He could not see her there. Windows were wide,
Late wasps were cruising, and the curtains shook.
Smoke, like the house's breathing, floated, sighed;
Among the trembling firs strange ways it took.
But still no Mary's presence blessed his look;
The house was still as if deserted, hushed.
Faint fragrance hung about it as if herbs were crushed.

Fragrance that gave his memory's guard a hint
Of times long past, of reapers in the corn,
Bruising with heavy boots the stalks of mint,
When first the berry reddens on the thorn.
Memories of her that fragrance brought. Forlorn
That vigil of the watching outcast grew;
He crept towards the kitchen, sheltered by a yew.

The windows of the kitchen opened wide.
Again the fragrance came; a woman spoke;

Old Mrs. Occleve talked to one inside.
A smell of cooking filled a gust of smoke.
Then fragrance once again, for herbs were broke;
Pourri was being made; the listener heard
Things lifted and laid down, bruised into sweetness, stirred.

While an old woman made remarks to one
Who was not the beloved: Michael learned
That Roger's wife at Upton had a son,
And that the red geraniums should be turned;
A hen was missing, and a rick was burned;
Our Lord commanded patience; here it broke;
The window closed, it made the kitchen chimney smoke.

Steps clacked on flagstones to the outer door;
A dairy-maid, whom he remembered well,
Lined, now, with age, and grayer than before,
Rang a cracked cow-bell for the dinner-bell.
He saw the dining-room; he could not tell
If Mary were within: inly he knew
That she was coming now, that she would be in blue,

Blue with a silver locket at the throat,
And that she would be there, within there, near,
With the little blushes that he knew by rote,
And the grey eyes so steadfast and so dear,
The voice, pure like the nature, true and clear,
Speaking to her belov'd within the room.
The gate clicked, Lion came: the outcast hugged the gloom,

Watching intently from below the boughs,
While Lion cleared his riding-boots of clay,
Eyed the high clouds and went within the house.
His eyes looked troubled, and his hair looked gray.
Dinner began within with much to say.
Old Occleve roared aloud at his own joke.
Mary, it seemed, was gone; the loved voice never spoke.

Nor could her lover see her from the yew;
She was not there at table; she was ill,

Ill, or away perhaps--he wished he knew.
Away, perhaps, for Occleve bellowed still.
"If sick," he thought, "the maid or Lion will
Take food to her." He watched; the dinner ended.
The staircase was not used; none climbed it, none descended.

"Not here," he thought; but wishing to be sure,
He waited till the Occleves went to field,
Then followed, round the house, another lure,
Using the well-known privet as his shield.
He meant to run a risk; his heart was steeled.
He knew of old which bedroom would be hers;
He crouched upon the north front in among the firs.

The house stared at him with its red-brick blank,
Its vacant window-eyes; its open door,
With old wrought bridle ring-hooks at each flank,
Swayed on a creaking hinge as the wind bore.
Nothing had changed; the house was as before,
The dull red brick, the windows sealed or wide:
"I will go in," he said. He rose and stepped inside.

None could have seen him coming; all was still;
He listened in the doorway for a sign.
Above, a rafter creaked, a stir, a thrill
Moved, till the frames clacked on the picture line.
"Old Mother Occleve sleeps, the servants dine,"
He muttered, listening. "Hush." A silence brooded.
Far off the kitchen dinner clattered; he intruded.

Still, to his right, the best room door was locked.
Another door was at his left; he stayed.
Within, a stately timepiece ticked and tocked,
To one who slumbered breathing deep; it made
An image of Time's going and man's trade.
He looked: Old Mother Occleve lay asleep,
Hands crossed upon her knitting, rosy, breathing deep.

He tiptoed up the stairs which creaked and cracked.
The landing creaked; the shut doors, painted gray,

Loomed, as if shutting in some dreadful act.
The nodding frames seemed ready to betray.
The east room had been closed in Michael's day,
Being the best; but now he guessed it hers;
The fields of daffodils lay next it, past the firs.

Just as he reached the landing, Lion cried,
Somewhere below, "I'll get it." Lion's feet
Struck on the flagstones with a hasty stride.
"He's coming up," thought Michael, "we shall meet."
He snatched the nearest door for his retreat,
Opened with thieves' swift silence, dared not close,
But stood within, behind it. Lion's footsteps rose,

Running two steps at once, while Michael stood,
Not breathing, only knowing that the room
Was someone's bedroom smelling of old wood,
Hung with engravings of the day of doom.
The footsteps stopped; and Lion called, to whom?
A gentle question, tapping at a door,
And Michael shifted feet, and creakings took the floor.

The footsteps recommenced, a door-catch clacked;
Within an eastern room the footsteps passed.
Drawers were pulled loudly open and ransacked,
Chattels were thrust aside and overcast.
What could the thing be that he sought. At last
His voice said, "Here it is." The wormed floor
Creaked with returning footsteps down the corridor.

The footsteps came as though the walker read,
Or added rows of figures by the way;
There was much hesitation in the tread;
Lion seemed pondering which, to go or stay;
Then, seeing the door, which covered Michael, sway,
He swiftly crossed and shut it. "Always one
For order," Michael muttered. "Now be swift, my son."

The action seemed to break the walker's mood;
The footsteps passed downstairs, along the hall,

xlvi

Out at the door and off towards the wood.
"Gone," Michael muttered. "Now to hazard all."
Outside, the frames still nodded on the wall.
Michael stepped swiftly up the floor to try
The door where Lion tapped and waited for reply.

It was the eastmost of the rooms which look
Over the fields of daffodils; the bound
Scanned from its windows is Ryemeadows brook,
Banked by gnarled apple trees and rising ground.
Most gently Michael tapped; he heard no sound,
Only the blind-pull tapping with the wind;
The kitchen-door was opened; kitchen-clatter dinned.

A woman walked along the hall below,
Humming; a maid, he judged; the footsteps died,
Listening intently still, he heard them go,
Then swiftly turned the knob and went inside.
The blind-pull at the window volleyed wide;
The curtains streamed out like a waterfall;
The pictures of the fox-hunt clacked along the wall.

No one was there; no one; the room was hers.
A book of praise lay open on the bed;
The clothes-press smelt of many lavenders,
Her spirit stamped the room; herself was fled.
Here she found peace of soul like daily bread,
Here, with her lover Lion; Michael gazed;
He would have been the sharer had he not been crazed.

He took the love-gift handkerchief again;
He laid it on her table, near the glass,
So opened that the broidered name was plain;
"Plain," he exclaimed, "she cannot let it pass.
It stands and speaks for me as bold as brass.
My answer, my heart's cry, to tell her this,
That she is still my darling: all she was she is.

"So she will know at least that she was wrong,
That underneath the blindness I was true.

Fate is the strongest thing, though men are strong;
Out from beyond life I was sealed to you.
But my blind ways destroyed the cords that drew;
And now, the evil done, I know my need;

Fate has his way with those who mar what is decreed.
"And now, goodbye." He closed the door behind him,
Then stept, with firm swift footstep down the stair,
Meaning to go where she would never find him;
He would go down through darkness to despair.
Out at the door he stept; the autumn air
Came fresh upon his face; none saw him go.
"Goodbye, my love," he muttered; "it is better so."

Soon he was on the high road, out of sight
Of valley and farm; soon he could see no more
The oast-house pointing finger take the light
As tumbling pigeons glittered over; nor
Could he behold the wind-vane gilded o'er,
Swinging above the church; the road swung round.
"Now, the last look," he cried: he saw that holy ground.

"Goodbye," he cried; he could behold it all,
Spread out as in a picture; but so clear
That the gold apple stood out from the wall;
Like a red jewel stood the grazing steer.
Precise, intensely coloured, all brought near,
As in a vision, lay that holy ground.
"Mary is there," he moaned, "and I am outward bound.

"I never saw this place so beautiful,
Never like this. I never saw it glow.
Spirit is on this place; it fills it full.
So let the die be cast; I will not go.
But I will see her face to face and know
From her own lips what thoughts she has of me;
And if disaster come: right; let disaster be."

Back, by another way, he turned. The sun
Fired the yew-tops in the Roman woods.

xlviii

Lights in the valley twinkled one by one,
The starlings whirled in dropping multitudes.
Dusk fingered into one earth's many moods,
Back to The Roughs he walked; he neared the brook;
A lamp burned in the farm; he saw; his fingers shook.

He had to cross the brook, to cross a field,
Where daffodils were thick when years were young.
Then, were she there, his fortunes should be sealed.
Down the mud trackway to the brook he swung;
Then while the passion trembled on his tongue,
Dim, by the dim bridge-stile, he seemed to see
A figure standing mute; a woman--it was she.

She stood quite stilly, waiting for him there.
She did not seem surprised; the meeting seemed
Planned from all time by powers in the air
To change their human fates; he even deemed
That in another life this thing had gleamed,
This meeting by the bridge. He said, "It's you."
"Yes, I," she said, "who else? You must have known; you knew

"That I should come here to the brook to see,
After your message." "You were out," he said.
"Gone, and I did not know where you could be.
Where were you, Mary, when the thing was laid?"
"Old Mrs. Gale is dying, and I stayed
Longer than usual, while I read the Word.
You could have hardly gone." She paused, her bosom stirred.

"Mary, I sinned," he said. "Not that, dear, no,"
She said; "but, oh, you were unkind, unkind,
Never to write a word and leave me so,
But out of sight with you is out of mind."
"Mary, I sinned," he said, "and I was blind.
Oh, my beloved, are you Lion's wife?"
"Belov'd sounds strange," she answered, "in my present life.

"But it is sweet to hear it, all the same.
It is a language little heard by me

Alone, in that man's keeping, with my shame.
I never thought such miseries could be.
I was so happy in you, Michael. He
Came when I felt you changed from what I thought you.
Even now it is not love, but jealousy that brought you."

"That is untrue," he said. "I am in hell.
You are my heart's beloved, Mary, you.
By God, I know your beauty now too well.
We are each other's, flesh and soul, we two."
"That was sweet knowledge once," she said; "we knew
That truth of old. Now, in a strange man's bed,
I read it in my soul, and find it written red."

"Is he a brute?" he asked. "No," she replied.
"I did not understand what it would mean.
And now that you are back, would I had died;
Died, and the misery of it not have been.
Lion would not be wrecked, nor I unclean.
I was a proud one once, and now I'm tame;
Oh, Michael, say some word to take away my shame."

She sobbed; his arms went round her; the night heard
Intense fierce whispering passing, soul to soul,
Love running hot on many a murmured word,
Love's passionate giving into new control.
Their present misery did but blow the coal,
Did but entangle deeper their two wills,
While the brown brook ran on by buried daffodils.

VII

Upon a light gust came a waft of bells,
Ringing the chimes for nine; a broken sweet,
Like waters bubbling out of hidden wells,
Dully upon those lovers' ears it beat,
Their time was at an end. Her tottering feet
Trod the dim field for home; he sought an inn.

"Oh, I have sinned," she cried, "but not a secret sin."

Inside The Roughs they waited for her coming;
Eyeing the ticking clock the household sat.
"Nine," the clock struck; the clock-weights ran down drumming;
Old Mother Occleve stretched her sewing flat.
"It's nine," she said. Old Occleve stroked the cat.
"Ah, cat," he said, "hast had good go at mouse?"
Lion sat listening tense to all within the house

"Mary is late to-night," the gammer said.
"The times have changed," her merry husband roared.
"Young married couples now like lonely trade,
Don't think of bed at all, they think of board.
No multiplying left in people. Lord!
When I was Lion's age I'd had my five.
There was some go in folk when us two took to wive."

Lion arose and stalked and bit his lip.
"Or was it six?" the old man muttered, "six.
Us had so many I've alost the tip.
Us were two right good souls at getting chicks.
Two births of twins, then Johnny's birth, then Dick's" ...
"Now give a young man time," the mother cried.
Mary came swiftly in and flung the room door wide.

Lion was by the window when she came,
Old Occleve and his wife were by the fire;
Big shadows leapt the ceiling from the flame.
She fronted the three figures and came nigher.
"Lion," she whispered, "I return my hire."
She dropped her marriage-ring upon the table.
Then, in a louder voice, "I bore what I was able,

"And Time and marriage might have worn me down,
Perhaps, to be a good wife and a blest,
With little children clinging to my gown,
And little blind mouths fumbling for my breast,
And this place would have been a place of rest
For you and me; we could have come to know

The depth; but that is over; I have got to go.

"He has come back, and I have got to go.
Our marriage ends." She stood there white and breathed.
Old Occleve got upon his feet with "So."
Blazing with wrath upon the hearth he seethed.
A log fell from the bars; blue spirals wreathed
Across the still old woman's startled face;
The cat arose and yawned. Lion was still a space.

Old Occleve turned to Lion. Lion moved
Nearer to Mary, picking up the ring.
His was grim physic from the soul beloved;
His face was white and twitching with the sting.
"You are my wife, you cannot do this thing,"
He said at last. "I can respect your pride.
This thing affects your soul; my judgment must decide.

"You are unsettled, shaken from the shock."
"Not so," she said. She stretched a hand to him,
White, large and noble, steady as a rock,
Cunning with many powers, curving, slim.
The smoke, drawn by the door-draught, made it dim.
"Right," Lion answered. "You are steady. Then
There is but one world, Mary; this, the world of men.

"And there's another world, without its bounds,
Peopled by streaked and spotted souls who prize
The flashiness that comes from marshy grounds
Above plain daylight. In their blinkered eyes
Nothing is bright but sentimental lies,
Such as are offered you, dear, here and now;
Lies which betray the strongest, God alone knows how.

"You, in your beauty and your whiteness, turn
Your strong, white mind, your faith, your fearless truth,
All for these rotten fires that so burn.
A sentimental clutch at perished youth.
I am too sick for wisdom, sick with ruth,
And this comes suddenly; the unripe man

Misses the hour, oh God. But you, what is your plan?

"What do you mean to do, how act, how live?
What warrant have you for your life? What trust?
You are for going sailing in a sieve.
This brightness is too mortal not to rust.
So our beginning marriage ends in dust.
I have not failed you, Mary. Let me know
What you intend to do, and whither you will go."

"Go from this place; it chokes me," she replied.
"This place has branded me; I must regain
My truth that I have soiled, my faith, my pride,
It is all poison and it leaves a stain.
I cannot stay nor be your wife again.
Never. You did your best, though; you were kind.
I have grown old to-night and left all that behind.

"Goodbye." She turned. Old Occleve faced his son.
Wrath at the woman's impudence was blent,
Upon his face, with wrath that such an one
Should stand unthrashed until her words were spent.
He stayed for Lion's wrath; but Mary went
Unchecked; he did not stir. Her footsteps ground
The gravel to the gate; the gate-hinge made a sound

Like to a cry of pain after a shot.
Swinging, it clicked, it clicked again, it swung
Until the iron latch bar hit the slot.
Mary had gone, and Lion held his tongue.
Old Mother Occleve sobbed; her white head hung
Over her sewing while the tears ran down
Her worn, blood-threaded cheeks and splashed upon her gown.

"Yes, it is true," said Lion, "she must go.
Michael is back. Michael was always first,
I did but take his place. You did not know.
Now it has happened, and you know the worst.
So passion makes the passionate soul accurst
And crucifies his darling. Michael comes

And the savage truth appears and rips my life to thrums."

Upon Old Occleve's face the fury changed
First to contempt, and then to terror lest
Lion, beneath the shock, should be deranged.
But Lion's eyes were steady, though distressed.
"Father, good-night," he said, "I'm going to rest.
Good-night, I cannot talk. Mother, good-night."
He kissed her brow and went; they heard him strike a light,

And go with slow depressed step up the stairs,
Up to the door of her deserted bower;
They heard him up above them, moving chairs;
The memory of his paleness made them cower.
They did not know their son; they had no power
To help, they only saw the new-won bride
Defy their child, and faith and custom put aside.

* * * * *

After a time men learned where Mary was:
Over the hills, not many miles away,
Renting a cottage and a patch of grass
Where Michael came to see her. Every day
Taught her what fevers can inhabit clay,
Shaking this body that so soon must die.
The time made Lion old: the winter dwindled by.

Till the long misery had to end or kill:
And "I must go to see her," Lion cried;
"I am her standby, and she needs me still;
If not to love she needs me to decide.
Dear, I will set you free. Oh, my bright bride,
Lost in such piteous ways, come back." He rode
Over the wintry hills to Mary's new abode.

And as he topped the pass between the hills,
Towards him, up the swerving road, there came
Michael, the happy cause of all his ills;
Walking as though repentance were the shame,

Sucking a grass, unbuttoned, still the same,
Humming a tune; his careless beauty wild
Drawing the women's eyes; he wandered with a child.

Who heard, wide-eyed, the scraps of tales which fell
Between the fragments of the tune; they seemed
A cherub bringing up a soul from hell.
Meeting unlike the meeting long since dreamed.
Lion dismounted; the great valley gleamed
With waters far below; his teeth were set
His heart thumped at his throat; he stopped; the two men met.

The child well knew that fatal issues joined;
He stood round-eyed to watch them, even as Fate
Stood with his pennypiece of causes coined
Ready to throw for issue; the bright hate
Throbbed, that the heavy reckoning need not wait.
Lion stepped forward, watching Michael's eyes.
"We are old friends," he said. "Now, Michael, you be wise,

"And let the harm already done suffice;
Go, before Mary's name is wholly gone.
Spare her the misery of desertion twice,
There's only ruin in the road you're on--
Ruin for both, whatever promise shone
In sentimental shrinkings from the fact.
So, Michael, play the man, and do the generous act.

"And go; if not for my sake, go for hers.
You only want her with your sentiment.
You are water roughed by every wind that stirs,
One little gust will alter your intent
All ways, to every wind, and nothing meant,
Is your life's habit. Man, one takes a wife,
Not for a three months' fancy, but the whole of life.

"We have been friends, and so I speak you fair.
How will you bear her ill, or cross, or tired?
Sentiment sighing will not help you there.
You call a half life's volume not desired.

I know your love for her. I saw it mired,
Mired, past going, by your first sharp taste
Of life and work; it stopped; you let her whole life waste,

"Rather than have the trouble of such love,
You will again; but if you do it now,
It will mean death, not sorrow. But enough.
You know too well you cannot keep a vow.
There are gray hairs already on her brow.
You brought them there. Death is the next step. Go,
Before you take the step." "No," Michael answered, "No.

"As for my past, I was a dog, a cur,
And I have paid blood-money, and still pay.
But all my being is ablaze with her;
There is no talk of giving up to-day.
I will not give her up. You used to say
Bodies are earth. I heard you say it. Liar!
You never loved her, you. She turns the earth to fire."

"Michael," said Lion, "you have said such things
Of other women; less than six miles hence
You and another woman felt love's wings
Rosy and fair, and so took leave of sense.
She's dead, that other woman, dead, with pence
Pressed on her big brown eyes, under the ground;
She that was merry once, feeling the world go round.

"Her child (and yours) is with her sister now,
Out there, behind us, living as they can;
Pinched by the poverty that you allow.
All a long autumn many rumours ran
About Sue Jones that was: you were the man.
The lad is like you. Think about his mother,
Before you turn the earth to fire with another."

"That is enough," said Michael, "you shall know
Soon, to your marrow, what my answer is;
Know to your lying heart; now kindly go.
The neighbours smell that something is amiss.

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We two will keep a dignity in this,
Such as we can. No quarrelling with me here.
Mary might see; now go; but recollect, my dear,

"That if you twit me with your wife, you lie;
And that your further insult waits a day
When God permits that Mary is not by;
I keep the record of it, and shall pay.
And as for Mary; listen: we betray
No one. We keep our troth-plight as we meant.
Now go, the neighbours gather." Lion bowed and went.

Home to his memories for a month of pain,
Each moment like a devil with a tongue,
Urging him, "Set her free," or "Try again,"
Or "Kill that man and stamp him into dung."
"See her," he cried. He took his horse and swung
Out on the road to her; the rain was falling;
Her dropping house-eaves splashed him when he knocked there, calling.

Drowned yellow jasmine dripped; his horse's flanks
Steamed, and dark runnels on his yellow hair
Streaked the groomed surface into blotchy ranks.
The noise of water dropping filled the air.
He knocked again; but there was no one there;
No one within, the door was locked, no smoke
Came from the chimney stacks, no clock ticked, no one spoke.

Only the water dripped and dribble-dripped,
And gurgled through the rain-pipe to the butt;
Drops, trickling down the windows paused or slipped;
A wet twig scraked as though the glass were cut.
The blinds were all drawn down, the windows shut.
No one was there. Across the road a shawl
Showed at a door a space; a woman gave a call.

"They're gone away," she cried. "They're gone away.
Been gone a matter of a week." Where to?
The woman thought to Wales, but could not say,
Nor if she planned returning; no one knew.

She looked at Lion sharply; then she drew
The half-door to its place and passed within,
Saying she hoped the rain would stop and spring begin.

Lion rode home. A month went by, and now
Winter was gone; the myriad shoots of green
Bent to the wind, like hair, upon the plough,
And up from withered leaves came celandine.
And sunlight came, though still the air was keen,
So that the first March market was most fair,
And Lion rode to market, having business there.

And in the afternoon, when all was done,
While Lion waited idly near the inn,
Watching the pigeons sidling in the sun,
As Jim the ostler put his gelding in,
He heard a noise of rioting begin
Outside the yard, with catcalls; there were shouts
Of "Occleve. Lion Occleve," from a pack of louts,

Who hung about the courtyard-arch, and cried,
"Yah, Occleve, of The Roughs, the married man,
Occleve, who had the bed and not the bride."
At first without the arch; but some began
To sidle in, still calling; children ran
To watch the baiting; they were farmer's leavings
Who shouted thus, men cast for drunkenness and thievings.

Lion knew most of them of old; he paid
No heed to them, but turned his back and talked
To Jim, of through-pin in his master's jade,
And how no horse-wounds should be stuped or caulked.
The rabble in the archway, not yet baulked,
Came crowding nearer, and the boys began,
"Who was it took your mistress, master married man?"

"Who was it, master, took your wife away?"
"I wouldn't let another man take mine."
"She had two husbands on her wedding day."
"See at a blush: he blushed as red as wine."

"She'd ought a had a cart-whip laid on fine."
The farmers in the courtyard watched the baiting,
Grinning, the barmaids grinned above the window grating.

Then through the mob of brawlers Michael stepped
Straight to where Lion stood. "I come," he said,
"To give you back some words which I have kept
Safe in my heart till I could see them paid.
You lied about Sue Jones; she died a maid
As far as I'm concerned, and there's your lie,
Full in your throat, and there, and there, and in your eye.

"And there's for stealing Mary" ... as he struck,
He slipped upon a piece of peel and dropped
Souse in a puddle of the courtyard muck;
Loud laughter followed when he rose up sopped.
Friends rushed to intervene, the fight was stopped.
The two were hurried out by different ways.
Men said, "'Tis stopped for now, but not for many days."

* * * * *

April appeared, the green earth's impulse came,
Pushing the singing sap until each bud
Trembled with delicate life as soft as flame,
Filled by the mighty heart-beat as with blood;
Death was at ebb, and Life in brimming flood.
But little joy in life could Lion see,
Striving to gird his will to set his loved one free,

While in his heart a hope still struggled dim
That the mad hour would pass, the darkness break,
The fever die, and she return to him,
The routed nightmare let the sleeper wake.
"Then we could go abroad," he cried, "and make
A new life, soul to soul; oh, love! return."
"Too late," his heart replied. At last he rode to learn.

Bowed, but alive with hope, he topped the pass,
And saw, below, her cottage by the way,

White, in a garden green with springing grass,
And smoke against the blue sky going gray.
"God make us all the happier for to-day,"
He muttered humbly; then, below, he spied,
Mary and Michael entering, walking side by side.

Arm within arm, like lovers, like dear lovers
Matched by the happy stars and newly wed,
Over whose lives a rosy presence hovers.
Lion dismounted, seeing hope was dead.
A child was by the road, he stroked his head,
And "Little one," he said, "who lives below
There, in the cottage there, where those two people go?"

"They do," the child said, pointing: "Mrs. Gray
Lives in the cottage there, and he does, too.
They've been back near a week since being away."
It was but seal to what he inly knew.
He thanked the child and rode. The Spring was blue,
Bluer than ever, and the birds were glad;
Such rapture in the hedges all the blackbirds had.

He was not dancing to that pipe of the Spring.
He reached The Roughs, and there, within her room,
Bowed for a time above her wedding ring,
Which had so chained him to unhappy doom;
All his dead marriage haunted in the gloom
Of that deserted chamber; all her things
Lay still as she had left them when her love took wings.

He kept a bitter vigil through the night,
Knowing his loss, his ten years' passion wasted,
His life all blasted, even at its height,
His cup of life's fulfilment hardly tasted.
Gray on the budding woods the morning hasted,
And looking out he saw the dawn come chill
Over the shaking acre pale with daffodil.

Birds were beginning in the meadows; soon
The blackbirds and the thrushes with their singing

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Piped down the withered husk that was the moon,
And up the sky the ruddy sun came winging.
Cows plodded past, yokes clanked, the men were bringing
Milk from the barton. Someone shouted "Hup,
Dog, drive them dangy red ones down away on up."

Some heavy hours went by before he rose.
He went out of the house into the grass,
Down which the wind flowed much as water flows;
The daffodils bowed down to let it pass.
At the brook's edge a boggy bit there was,
Right at the field's north corner, near the bridge,
Fenced by a ridge of earth; he sat upon the ridge,

Watching the water running to the sea,
Watching the bridge, the stile, the path beyond,
Where the white violet's sweetness brought the bee.
He paid the price of being overfond.
The water babbled always from the pond
Over the pretty shallows, chattering, tinkling,
With trembles from the sunlight in its clearness wrinkling.

So gazing, like one stunned, it reached his mind,
That the hedge-brambles overhung the brook
More than was right, making the selvage blind;
The dragging brambles too much flotsam took.
Dully he thought to mend. He fetched a hook,
And standing in the shallow stream he slashed,
For hours, it seemed; the thorns, the twigs, the dead leaves splashed,

Splashed and were bobbed away across the shallows;
Pale grasses with the sap gone from them fell,
Sank, or were carried down beyond the sallows.
The bruised ground-ivy gave out earthy smell.
"I must be dead," he thought, "and this is hell."
Fiercely he slashed, till, glancing at the stile,
He saw that Michael stood there, watching, with a smile,

His old contemptuous smile of careless ease,
As though the world with all its myriad pain

Sufficed, but only just sufficed, to please.
Michael was there, the robber come again.
A tumult ran like flame in Lion's brain;
Then, looking down, he saw the flowers shake:
Gold, trembling daffodils; he turned, he plucked a stake

Out of the hedge that he had come to mend,
And flung his hook to Michael, crying, "Take;
We two will settle our accounts, my friend,
Once and for ever. May the Lord God make
You see your sins in time." He whirled his stake
And struck at Michael's head; again he struck;
While Michael dodged and laughed, "Why, man, I bring you luck.

"Don't kill a bringer of good news. You fool,
Stop it and listen. I have come to say:
Lion, for God's sake, listen and be cool.
You silly hothead, put that stake away.
Listen, I tell you." But he could not stay
The anger flaming in that passionate soul.
Blows rained upon him thick; they stung; he lost control.

Till, "If you want to fight," he cried, "let be.
Let me get off the bridge and we will fight.
That firm bit by the quag will do for me.
So. Be on guard, and God defend the right.
You foaming madman, with your hell's delight,
Smashing a man with stakes before he speaks:
On guard. I'll make you humbler for the next few weeks."

The ground was level there; the daffodils
Glimmered and danced beneath their cautious feet,
Quartering for openings for the blow that kills.
Beyond the bubbling brook a thrush was sweet.
Quickly the footsteps slid; with feint and cheat,
The weapons poised and darted and withdrew.
"Now stop it," Michael said, "I want to talk to you."

"We do not stop till one of us is dead,",
Said Lion, rushing in. A short blow fell

Dizzily, through all guard, on Michael's head.
His hedging-hook slashed blindly but too well:
It struck in Lion's side. Then, for a spell,
Both, sorely stricken, staggered, while their eyes
Dimmed under mists of blood; they fell, they tried to rise,--

Tried hard to rise, but could not, so they lay,
Watching the clouds go sailing on the sky,
Touched with a redness from the end of day.
There was all April in the blackbird's cry.
And lying there they felt they had to die,
Die and go under mould and feel no more
April's green fire of life go running in earth's core.

"There was no need to hit me," Michael said;
"You quiet thinking fellows lose control.
This fighting business is a foolish trade.
And now we join the grave-worm and the mole.
I tried to stop you. You're a crazy soul;
You always were hot-headed. Well, let be:
You deep and passionate souls have always puzzled me.

"I'm sorry that I struck you. I was hit,
And lashed out blindly at you; you were mad.
It would be different if you'd stopped a bit.
You are too blind when you are angry, lad.
Oh, I am giddy, Lion; dying, bad,
Dying." He raised himself, he sat, his look
Grew greedy for the water bubbling in the brook.

And as he watched it, Lion raised his head;
Out of a bloodied clump of daffodil.
"Michael," he moaned, "I, too, am dying: dead.
You're nearer to the water. Could you fill
Your hat and give me drink? Or would it spill?
Spill, I expect." "I'll try," said Michael, "try--
I may as well die trying, since I have to die."

Slowly he forced his body's failing life
Down to the water; there he stooped and filled;

And as his back turned Lion drew his knife,
And hid it close, while all his being thrilled
To see, as Michael came, the water spilled,
Nearer and ever nearer, bright, so bright.
"Drink," muttered Michael, "drink. We two shall sleep to-night."

He tilted up the hat, and Lion drank.
Lion lay still a moment, gathering power,
Then rose, as Michael gave him more, and sank.
Then, like a dying bird whom death makes tower,
He raised himself above the bloodied flower
And struck with all his force in Michael's side.
"You should not have done that," his stricken comrade cried.

"No; for I meant to tell you, Lion; meant
To tell you; but I cannot now; I die.
That hit me to the heart and I am spent.
Mary and I have parted; she and I
Agreed she must return, lad. That is why
I came to see you. She is coming here,
Back to your home to-night. Oh, my beloved dear,

"You come to tread a bloody path of flowers.
All the gold flowers are covered up with blood,
And the bright bugles blow along the towers;
The bugles triumph like the Plate in flood."
His spilled life trickled down upon the mud
Between weak, clutching fingers. "Oh," he cried,
"This isn't what we planned here years ago." He died.

Lion lay still while the cold tides of death
Came brimming up his channels. With one hand
He groped to know if Michael still drew breath.
His little hour was running out its sand.
Then, in a mist, he saw his Mary stand
Above. He cried aloud, "He was my brother.
I was his comrade sworn, and we have killed each other.

"Oh desolate grief, beloved, and through me.
We wise who try to change. Oh, you wild birds,

Help my unhappy spirit to the sea.
The golden bowl is scattered into sherds."
And Mary knelt and murmured passionate words
To that poor body on the dabbled flowers:
"Oh, beauty, oh, sweet soul, oh, little love of ours--

"Michael, my own heart's darling, speak; it's me,
Mary. You know my voice. I'm here, dear, here.
Oh, little golden-haired one, listen. See,
It's Mary, Michael. Speak to Mary, dear.
Oh, Michael, little love, he cannot hear;
And you have killed him, Lion; he is dead.
My little friend, my love, my Michael, golden head.

"We had such fun together, such sweet fun,
My love and I, my merry love and I.
Oh, love, you shone upon me like the sun.
Oh, Michael, say some little last good-bye."
Then in a great voice Lion called, "I die.
Go home and tell my people. Mary. Hear.
Though I have wrought this ruin, I have loved you, dear.

"Better than he; not better, dear, as well.
If you could kiss me, dearest, at this last.
We have made bloody doorways from our hell,
Cutting our tangle. Now, the murder past,
We are but pitiful poor souls; and fast
The darkness and the cold come. Kiss me, sweet;
I loved you all my life; but some lives never meet

"Though they go wandering side by side through Time.
Kiss me," he cried. She bent, she kissed his brow:
"Oh, friend," she said, "you're lying in the slime."
"Three blind ones, dear," he murmured, "in the slough,
Caught fast for death; but never mind that now;
Go home and tell my people. I am dying,
Dying, dear, dying now." He died; she left him lying,

And kissed her dead one's head and crossed the field.
"They have been killed," she called, in a great crying.

"Killed, and our spirits' eyes are all unsealed.
The blood is scattered on the flowers drying."
It was the hush of dusk, and owls were flying;
They hooted as the Occleves ran to bring
That sorry harvest home from Death's red harvesting.

They laid the bodies on the bed together.
And "You were beautiful," she said, "and you
Were my own darling in the April weather.
You knew my very soul, you knew, you knew.
Oh, my sweet, piteous love, I was not true.
Fetch me fair water and the flowers of spring;
My love is dead, and I must deck his burying."

They left her with her dead; they could not choose
But grant the spirit burning in her face
Rights that their pity urged them to refuse.
They did her sorrow and the dead a grace.
All night they heard her passing footsteps trace
Down to the garden from the room of death.
They heard her singing there, lowly, with gentle breath,

To the cool darkness full of sleeping flowers,
Then back, still singing soft, with quiet tread,
But at the dawn her singing gathered powers
Like to the dying swan who lifts his head
On Eastnor, lifts it, singing, dabbled red,
Singing the glory in his tumbling mind,
Before the doors burst in, before death strikes him blind.

So triumphing her song of love began,
Ringing across the meadows like old woe
Sweetened by poets to the help of man
Unconquered in eternal overthrow;
Like a great trumpet from the long ago
Her singing towered; all the valley heard.
Men jingling down to meadow stopped their teams and stirred.

And they, the Occleves, hurried to the door,
And burst it, fearing; there the singer lay

Drooped at her lover's bedside on the floor,
Singing her passionate last of life away.
White flowers had fallen from a blackthorn spray
Over her loosened hair. Pale flowers of spring
Filled the white room of death; they covered everything.

Primroses, daffodils, and cuckoo-flowers.
She bowed her singing head on Michael's breast.
"Oh, it was sweet," she cried, "that love of ours.
You were the dearest, sweet; I loved you best.
Beloved, my beloved, let me rest
By you forever, little Michael mine.
Now the great hour is stricken, and the bread and wine

"Broken and spilt; and now the homing birds
Draw to a covert, Michael; I to you.
Bury us two together," came her words.
The dropping petals fell about the two.
Her heart had broken; she was dead. They drew
Her gentle head aside; they found it pressed
Against the broidered 'kerchief spread on Michael's breast,

The one that bore her name in Michael's hair,
Given so long before. They let her lie,
While the dim moon died out upon the air,
And happy sunlight coloured all the sky.
The last cock crowed for morning; carts went by;
Smoke rose from cottage chimneys; from the byre
The yokes went clanking by, to dairy, through the mire.

In the day's noise the water's noise was stilled,
But still it slipped along, the cold hill-spring,
Dropping from leafy hollows, which it filled,
On to the pebbly shelves which made it sing;
Glints glittered on it from the 'fisher's wing;
It saw the moorhen nesting; then it stayed
In a great space of reeds where merry otters played.

Slowly it loitered past the shivering reeds
Into a mightier water; thence its course

Becomes a pasture where the salmon feeds,
Wherein no bubble tells its humble source;
But the great waves go rolling, and the horse
Snorts at the bursting waves and will not drink,
And the great ships go outward, bubbling to the brink,

Outward, with men upon them, stretched in line,
Handling the halliards to the ocean's gates,
Where flicking windflaws fill the air with brine,
And all the ocean opens. Then the mates
Cry, and the sunburnt crew no longer waits,
But sing triumphant and the topsail fills
To this old tale of woe among the daffodils.

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